

Response to Agier, Bueno and Ullberg

Resposta a Agier, Bueno e Ullberg

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It is truly a privilege to receive comments from Michel Agier, Carmen Bueno and Susann Ullberg, colleagues whom I admire and who have been interlocutors in my own trajectory in different ways. I thank *Anuário Antropológico* for this opportunity to engage with them. I have tried to respond to their sophisticated observations as far as I could, but I am unsure whether I have succeeded. In any event, I express my gratitude to my three colleagues for their readings and thought-provoking comments: *muito obrigado*.

Michel Agier starts by underscoring the relationship between my essay and ethnography, and, therefore, the long-standing anthropological practice of in-depth field research. He makes the interesting suggestion that one productive way of considering the diverse issues at stake is for us to focus on the relationships between situation and context. I entirely agree since I am an admirer of the endeavor of another French anthropologist/sociologist, George Balandier (1951), to bring together situations and larger contexts when he coined the notion of “situation colonial” more than seven decades ago. I am pleased that Agier emphasized the importance of “the political dimension of scales” and especially the current struggles over the meaning and relationships between the global and national levels of agencies. Whether verbalized by terms like globalist or nationalist, the debates over scales are thus part of today’s political dramas. Many answers to our conundrums are also impregnated with the idiom of scale, such as when communitarian life (meaning life at local and sometimes regional levels of agencies) is presented as a solution. I am also in agreement with what underlies his question about the political uses of the social sciences in public debates and, more, I am increasingly convinced that the social sciences, willingly or not, are widely involved in political debates, especially in what I call ideological and political struggles (Ribeiro 2023).

Agier rightly draws attention to the risks of reifying scale, turning it into a noun, a verb, a thing. However, while I share his preoccupation about the reification of concepts, it is quite different to admit that scale exists whether social scientists are interested in it or not, or when they use the word in metaphorical ways. Let me explain further. I will provide a quick illustration of my argument: it is one thing to talk about a single individual’s action, another entirely to talk about a crowd’s. Indeed, when it comes to social and political agency, whether we are considering one person or a collectivity is an issue that interested founders of the social sciences as distinct as Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. Furthermore, what Agier calls situation, as he rightly affirmed in the opening paragraph of his comments, cannot be thought outside of its contexts, many of which will be unamenable to ethnographic research and are thus only imaginable. As for the issue of reification, one of my main goals in introducing the Freudian notion of condensation was precisely to avoid this problem. However, I wonder if it is possible to completely avoid at least some degree of reification in the construction of concepts that have hard empirical referents such as the local. Indeed, “things,” hard and solid ones such as the number, shapes and materials of houses in a small indigenous Amazonian village, do have a verifiable (in the positivist sense of the word) quality. Nothing of what I just said means that I am unaware of the problems

of reification – one that I address in some passages of the texts. Perhaps they are an effect of the fact that everything human is embedded in language, in representation, if you will. Networks, too, can easily be reified and become a metaphor to consider scales, as indeed many theoreticians of scales have proposed. What I am saying is that every concept is potentially reifiable when one tries to relate it to ethnographic research. I may be wrong but one of the claims I make in this essay is that ethnography alone is not enough to deal with the complexities of contexts, something that most anthropologists working on contemporary problems know intuitively.

I am also glad that Agier touched on the issue of internet at the end of his comments. There are many ways of answering his stimulating question and remarks. I started to write and publish about the internet in the 1990s (Ribeiro 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2018). It was clear to me that the internet – with its cyberspace condensing an indefinite multiplicity of loci and with its on-line temporality fusing all global time zones – made it possible to explore the virtual existence of the transnational level of agency. In fact, I saw it as the technological innovation that made virtuality – a mind/brain capacity embedded in our capacity to use language – capable of conscious manipulation by social agents. It is true that by creating the “virtual-public-space” (Ribeiro 2003b), the internet dissolves the physical scales of time and space as they are empirically experienced by us. It is also true that we can no longer live without it. However, unless we wish to reify the meaning of living, we do not really live within cyberspace (a term now fallen into disuse). Many major kinds of exchanges – chemical, biological, economic, cooperative and others – can only be made in what I have called “the real-public-space,” meaning that all our senses are directly involved in our experiences and interactions in concrete, empirical situations (*ibid.*). To conclude my response to Agier, it was the existence of the internet, with its condensing power, that allowed me not only to think about transnationalism but also to articulate the transnational anthropological politics that underlies the world anthropologies project and its resulting network, the World Council of Anthropological Associations. We can obviously do things within the virtual public space. In relation to virtual ethnography, an experiment that has been going on for more than a decade now, I still think that, as an experience, it is not as totalizing as the classic Malinowskian model. But this discussion would lead us to take up too much of the space I have been allocated.

Carmen Bueno aptly summarizes my theoretical enterprise when she says I discuss three axes related to how we can think about complex issues, scales, levels of agency and condensation without simplifying the scope of their differences, their diverse heuristic efficacies (if I can put it that way) and how they relate to each other. However, condensation is not part of any analytical repertoire or toolbox. This is what I find so attractive about it. This is a notion that refers to the complexity of the lived world. In the end, I am revisiting one of the main methodological and theoretical issues in the social sciences: how do we perceive the empirical world and translate it into a set of interpretive categories that make up a higher level of abstraction that, hopefully, goes beyond circumscribed scenar-

ios and allows for a productive comparison capable of illuminating a diversity of concrete lived examples.

Bueno captures my aim here when she says: “It is precisely the recomposition of scalar space and the densification of all times that gives meaning to the pluriverse dynamizing megaprojects. Levels of agency are an analytical axis that complements the previous one because they explain the intervention or influence of diverse social agents at the scales in which they participate, which allows us to analyze the possibilities for maneuver in conflict resolution and the protection of interests at different scales.”

While I use megaprojects as a powerful scenario to contextualize and explore my interpretations, my text also contains a wider and more ambitious goal: to offer the tools needed to think about all scenarios in which local and supralocal dynamics are crucial for their structuring. Nowhere is there a stronger proposition in this direction than in my considerations on condensation. And this is where Bueno raises several questions. I will try to answer some of them. Condensation is a concept that Freud coined to interpret phenomena manifested in dreams and the unconscious. But he also resorts to “urban” and “historical” metaphors, as in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), to explain how the juxtaposition of buildings constructed in different moments (i.e. the accumulation of concrete past experiences) in the city of Rome would challenge any analyst’s capacity for interpretation. To read the structuration of an ancient city in a truly comprehensible way, the interpreter should be able to determine – like a sophisticated historian – when the buildings seen were built, which buildings existed on the same site previously, and what they meant both when they were built and in the present. I would add that this is also a call to avoid the pitfalls represented by empiricism, presentism and commodity fetishism. In this way, the interpreter is supposed to undertake a double movement: to see the complexity of the parts of a totality and, at the same time, to understand its combination and appearance as a totality. Condensation thus needs to be understood as a methodological awareness of the simultaneous unicity of the parts and the totality. It is the first and final moment of any interpretation of complex processes. First, because it is the departure point (the awareness that everything is structured by different historical processes originating in a myriad of time frames and places) from which the analysis will proceed by considering the dynamics of the different levels of agency and scales involved in what is being scrutinized. Condensation is also the final step because it is the arrival point of the hermeneutic process; that is, it implies the reconstruction of the totality that was temporarily dismantled. In this sense, Bueno is also right when she posits that my essay has epistemological intentions. Finally, I thank her for reminding me and the readers that cyberspace has meant, to some extent, the restructuration of the relationships between levels of agency. In fact, as I mentioned earlier in my reply to Agier’s comment, in 1998 I published an article on how cyberspace had introduced different dynamics that made possible the full emergence of the transnational level of agency with its imagined-virtual transnational communities (Ribeiro 1998, 2003a). I was inspired by Benedict Anderson’s (1991) well-known

argument on “national imagined communities” and was interested in what I called the witnessing-at-a-distance and the political-activism-at-a-distance capacities of transnational agents implemented within this virtual-public-space.

Susann Ullberg and I share more interests than may be apparent at first sight. Argentina and megaprojects are clearly the two strongest. I am content that my doctoral research on Yacyretá proved helpful to her own work. This was an ethnographic study I made in the second half of the 1980s on the construction of a major hydroelectric dam on the Paraná River on the border of Argentina and Paraguay. At the same time, I may have given Ullberg the wrong impression that I deem all of Tsing’s work on scale to be problematic and I thank her for making me read again the relevant passages of Tsing’s well-known book *Friction*. I fully agree with Ullberg that Tsing’s concern with how elites use scales to exert power is an important issue. My point, though, is how we should go about exploring this topic. I think it is more productive to show who the people involved in these power-building efforts are, in what places they act, for what purposes and with what contradictions, and how all this is put together by different agents/agencies. In this regard, I am not really convinced that the kind of conceptual elaboration Tsing offers on scale is the best proposition. Substituting the real articulations made by diverse agents/agencies located in different loci with the idea of “scaling” may be an appropriate abstract shortcut, but only as a general conclusion after making a solid ethnographic account. In connection to this point, my attention is drawn to the fact that Tsing puts the scale metaphor aside in her book’s final chapter, “The Forest of Collaborations,” and prefers to talk about “alliances” instead. Although Ullberg considers the term “levels of agency” to be an unnecessary neologism, my elaboration of the notion is closely related to my methodological (and political) critique of Tsing’s discussion of scales. In fact, the notion of levels of agency is not meant to be a substitute for the entire scale debate but a complementary tool to make such debates more amenable to ethnographic research and to help clearly identify the agencies/agents directly involved in the definition of the directions taken by conflictive global processes.

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